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The Influence of the Bible on later culture and literature

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As this essay involves the influence of the Bible upon literature a prior warning is issued. If the readers of this essay have not already read the *Harry Potter* series or the *Chronicles of Narnia* series, then be warned. There are spoilers from both of them, if you choose to read on. You have been warned!

The question of whether the Bible is still relevant in modern life is still a hotly debated topic. However, it is a topic which remains irrelevant to this particular study. It should be first acknowledged that there are many different beliefs in our society. The belief which stems from the Bible is only one of them. To further strengthen the beliefs provided by the Bible, this essay will focus on the strong influence that the Bible exercises over the culture and literature that our current civilisation has written. This will be demonstrated by analysing in the first part, our culture and each aspect of it that the Bible still holds influence over. In the second part, the discussion will focus on the influence that the Bible has held over the literature of our time, with specific focus upon *The Chronicles of Narnia* series and the *Harry Potter* series.

Part 1: Culture

Culture, is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as the customs and the civilisation of a particular time or people. In turn, customs are revealed to be our usual behavioural activities, and civilisation denotes the advanced stages of social development, our progress towards civilisation, and our comfort and convenience. In light of these definitions it is customary, in our culture, to name our children with Biblical links. In the top fifty baby boy names for 2012¹ there are fourteen names which are found in the Bible.² Some of these include, Noah³, Samuel⁴, Joshua⁵, James⁶, and Daniel⁷. While the names, Hannah⁸ and Abigail⁹, for baby girls were numbers nineteen and twenty-six respectively¹⁰. Even though the Bible has not influenced our choices of modern baby names very heavily, it has, without a doubt, held some influence.

The Ten Commandments, as given by God to Moses, still hold a particularly forceful influence over modern Australian society. The sixth commandment says "You shall not murder." In Australia, if convicted for the Murder of an Australian citizen or an Australian resident, the penalty is life imprisonment.¹¹ While murder cannot be prevented in Australia, if it is committed, it is punished to the highest degree. It was the Bible that records the fact that the crime of murder is bad.

¹ Fairfax Media. April 16, 2013. Australia's top 100 baby names of 2012. URL:

<http://www.essentialbaby.com.au/pregnancy/baby-names/australias-top-100-baby-names-of-2012-20130416-2hx91.html>. Date Accessed: 09/08/2013.

² 3 - Noah, 6 - Thomas, 8 - James, 12 - Joshua, 13 - Jacob, 14 - Alexander, 15 - Samuel, 17 - Benjamin, 24 - Isaac, 26 - Levi, 29 - Daniel, 46 - Matthew, 47 - Luke, and 50 - Elijah.

³ "When Lamach had lived 182 years, he had a son. He named him Noah." (Genesis 5:28-29)

⁴ "So in the course of time Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel." (1 Samuel 1:20)

⁵ "The seventh time around, when the priests sounded the trumpet blast, Joshua commanded the people: 'Shout! For the Lord has given you the city!'" (Joshua 6:16)

⁶ "For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John." (Luke 5:9)

⁷ "When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, 'Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?'" (Daniel 6:20)

⁸ "Then Hannah prayed and said: 'My heart rejoices in the Lord; in the Lord my horn is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance.'" (1 Samuel 2:1)

⁹ "His name was Nabal and his wife's name was Abigail. She was an intelligent and beautiful woman, but her husband, a Calebite, was surly and mean in his dealings." (1 Samuel 25:3)

¹⁰ KidSpot. April 2, 2013. Australia's 100 most popular baby names. URL: <http://www.kidspot.com.au/australias-100-most-popular-baby-names/>. Date Accessed: 06/08/2014

¹¹ Australian Government ComLaw. (2014) Criminal Code Act 1995. Australian Government. URL: http://www.comlaw.gov.au/Details/C2014C00196/Html/Volume_1. Date accessed: 07/08/2014

The eighth commandment says "You shall not steal." In Australia, for the crime of theft, the punishment is ten years imprisonment.¹² While theft cannot be prevented either it will still be punished. Therefore, the Bible still holds a particularly strong influence over Australian laws. It might be the best for Australian society that these particular laws are still in place. It may be because of this that the punishments for these crimes are so severe and not because they were outlined as crimes in the Bible. But whether the law came from the Bible and it is due to its origins that it now formulates Australian criminal law, is not the focus of this essay.

On a less severe note is the tenth commandment. "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuse his name." The tenth commandment does not still hold such an influence over modern Australian society. However, there are still people within Australia who are deeply offended when other people use the exhortation "Oh my God!" Therefore, the Bible still influences the laws that we, as Australians, abide by in our Australian culture.

The Superhero culture, seen at Supernova¹³ and ComicCon,¹⁴ which has been widely expanding in recent years, owes a great debt to the Bible. Characters such as the Human Torch¹⁵ and the Incredible Hulk¹⁶ possess characteristics that also manifested themselves in the Bible. The Human Torch has the ability to transform himself into fire, but not burn himself up whilst doing so. A version of this was seen in the Bible in the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.¹⁷ King Nebuchadnezzar made a statue of himself and then commanded everyone living in Babylon, under his rule, to bow down to the statue and to worship it. When Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego defied him, for it would mean that they were being disobedient to God, they were thrown into a fiery furnace. Even though King Nebuchadnezzar ordered the fire to be made seven times hotter than usual, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego remained untouched by the flames. When King Nebuchadnezzar called them from the flames their robes were not scorched and not a single hair on their heads was singed.

Similarly, the Incredible Hulk has the ability to use super strength, alongside other traits which will not be discussed here. In the Bible, there is a man named Samson¹⁸ who also possessed super-human strength. He was able to bring an entire temple down simply by pushing on two of the temple's central columns.¹⁹ Both the Human Torch and the Incredible Hulk are, themselves both, gifted super-humanly after separate freak accidents made them that way. For Samson and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego on the other hand, they are able to withstand the flames without being burned and bring down a temple with the help of God. It is true that the people in the Bible were not themselves powerful, for it was God making them powerful whereas, modern superheros in many comic books are themselves powerful after specific occurrences in their lives. The influence of the Bible extends, in this instance, to the fact that the abilities shown in the people from the comic books and in the Bible are the same. The Bible may not have influenced the creation of superheros and the desire for people to be imbued with superhuman powers. However, for the purposes of this study there are certain connections which can be drawn between the two and because of this the influence the Bible has played on modern superhero culture is existent albeit very weakly.

Part 2: Literature

Literature, also as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* refers to any written work, especially works valued for either their form or style. The *Harry Potter* series can definitely be classified as literature, as it is a great literary work, not only in terms of how large it was, seven books in total, but also because of its sheer popularity. The Bible

¹² Australian Government ComLaw. (2014) Criminal Code Act 1995. Australian Government. URL: http://www.comlaw.gov.au/Details/C2014C00196/Html/Volume_1. Date accessed: 07/08/2014

¹³ Supernova (2015) Pop Culture Convention. URL: <http://www.supanova.com.au/>. Date Accessed: 07/08/2014.

¹⁴ ComicCon. (2015) Pop Culture Convention. URL: <http://www.comic-con.org/cci>. Date Accessed: 07/08/2014.

¹⁵ Marvel.com (2007) Johnny Storm/ The Human Torch. URL: [http://marvel.com/universe/Human_Torch_\(Johnny_Storm\)](http://marvel.com/universe/Human_Torch_(Johnny_Storm)). Date Accessed: 07/08/2014.

¹⁶ Marvel.com (2014) Bruce Banner/ The Incredible Hulk. URL: [http://marvel.com/universe/Hulk_\(Bruce_Banner\)](http://marvel.com/universe/Hulk_(Bruce_Banner)). Date Accessed: 07/08/2014.

¹⁷ (Daniel 3)

¹⁸ (Judges 15)

¹⁹ (Judges 16:25.31)

does exercise its influence over the pages of the series, but the sections that can be compared most easily to the Bible are found within the last book of the series entitled *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*.

In the first instance, both of the epitaphs, found etched upon the headstones of Lily and James Potter and Kendra and Ariana Dumbledore, can be found within the pages of the Bible. The epitaph of Lily and James Potter,²⁰ reads "The last enemy that will be destroyed is death." This quotation, can be found at chapter 15 verse 26 in the book of the Bible, entitled 1 Corinthians. The other quotation, found in Matthew chapter 6 verse 24, reads "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." This exact quotation composes the epitaph of Kendra and Ariana Dumbledore as found in the seventh and final novel of the *Harry Potter* series, entitled *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*²¹. Whether these quotations were found in other pre-Bible literature, which in turn, influenced J.K. Rowling's decision to utilise them in her work; is not the case. In a press conference in Los Angeles on October the fifteenth, J.K. Rowling admitted that the quotations she had used were taken directly from the Bible. At the press conference she recalled "They're very British books, so on a very practical note Harry was going to find Biblical quotations on tombstones."²² So it is here that begins the influence that the Bible holds over literature written two thousand years after it.

In the next instance, Harry Potter is cursed with the killing curse. The killing curse, also known as Avada Kedavra, has only ever left one survivor; Harry Potter himself. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, in order for Harry Potter to succeed in killing his foe, Lord Voldemort, he needs to rid himself of a portion of Voldemort's own soul, which latched itself onto him when he survived the killing curse as a baby. Therefore, when he confronts Lord Voldemort in their penultimate confrontation, Lord Voldemort partially succeeds in killing him. Lord Voldemort kills the part of his soul within Harry Potter. In this time Harry Potter is taken within his mind and given the opportunity to die and leave the world for good or to return to the world to meet Lord Voldemort in their final showdown. So Harry Potter, to everyone who sees his death, is believed to be dead. But when the time is right Harry Potter, who up until that point had been faking death makes a miraculous recovery. This collection of scenes is influenced by the Bible through the fact that Harry Potter "died" but he "rose again." Just like in the Bible, Jesus was nailed to a cross and he "died" but he "rose again also. He gave up his spirit and died, but on the third day he rose again.

Lastly, the clear divide of both the good side and the bad side is very indicative of the Bible which also has its clear divide between the two. Harry Potter is the main protagonist of the series and Lord Voldemort is the main antagonist. In their many confrontations over the course of the series, Harry Potter is representative of the good side and Lord Voldemort is likewise for the bad side. The confrontations that these two characters share also link them to the Bible. Just as God is constantly being challenged by Satan, or the Devil, Harry Potter is also being constantly challenged by his arch rival, Lord Voldemort.

The Harry Potter series is not the only book series that has Christian ideologies woven within its fabric. The Narnia series, written by C.S. Lewis, has also been influenced by the Bible. In the first novel, *The Magician's Nephew*, the character of Aslan, the name given to the lion, can be aligned the most exactly with the God referred to in the Christian Bible. When the land of Narnia is first being created, Aslan, sings.²³ As he sings, the earth, sky, stars, sun, and all manner of flora and fauna are brought into existence within the land of Narnia. This particular theme can be likened to the creation of "the heavens and the earth" as completed by God.²⁴ The only difference between the way that God created the world, and the way that Aslan creates his world, is that God speaks, instead of singing. When God speaks "Let there be light" and "Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water," he brings his own creation to fulfilment. While it could be debated that Aslan's, singing the land of Narnia into existence, is in complete apposition to the spoken creation fulfilment of God in the Bible. The fact remains that, both Aslan and God used their breath to bring their creation into existence, whether they used words or song is irrelevant, and the connection between the Bible and the Narnia series still remains.

As with every book where there is a protagonist and an antagonist, The Chronicles of Narnia series also has both of these. Aslan stands in clear view as being the undebatable leader of the good side; whereas the White Witch is

²⁰ (Rowling:2007,268-9)

²¹ (Rowling:2007,266-7)

²² (Garcia:2007)

²³ (Lewis:2010,61)

²⁴ (Genesis:1)

clearly the antagonist, fronting the bad side. At first glance, this may seem a bit puzzling to those who do not know about the Bible. They may be thinking about how the parts, of the protagonist and the antagonist, can find their foundations within the Bible? This is made clear by the fact that for an antagonist to exist there needs to be first a protagonist. The protagonist mainly acts to stand in opposition of all that the antagonist attempts. Just like Aslan and the White Witch in the Chronicles of Narnia. God is the protagonist and Satan is the Antagonist in the Bible. Just like in the Harry Potter series and the Bible where God and Harry Potter are both challenged by Satan and Lord Voldemort respectively, the confrontations between Aslan and the White Witch are the White Witch's attempts to challenge Aslan and his successful countering of those challenges.

In the second instalment of the Chronicles of Narnia in the *Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Edmund sells out his brother and sisters and abandons them so that he can join the side of the White Witch, and in doing so commits treason.²⁵ However, once on the side of the White Witch he realises what a mistake he has made and he is able to escape with some help from Aslan's supporters. When the White Witch realises that her prisoner has been taken she confronts Aslan demanding that Edmund be handed over to her. This is because the foundation laws that Narnia was built upon state that any traitor belongs to the Witch and that if she so desires, she also has the right to kill said traitor upon the Stone Table.²⁶ Aslan does not want to hand Edmund over to the Witch so after a lengthy discussion with the Witch, she renounces her claim upon Edmund. Thus Edmund is able to go free. However, the discussion resulted in a mere transference where the Witch had agreed to kill Aslan when he offered himself up as the sacrifice in the stead of Edmund. So Aslan is taken to the Stone Table, where he is killed by the White Witch. But because Aslan was innocent of the crime that Edmund had been convicted of, the Stone Table broke. This resulted in Aslan being resurrected.²⁷

The Biblical influence in this series of scenes has God's creation, humans, in the place of Edmund. We have committed the wrong and sinned against God. Jesus in turn, is the sacrifice; standing in the place of the humans, despite the fact that he had not committed any crime or wrong. So when Jesus was nailed upon the cross and dies, our sins have been taken away.²⁸ But because Jesus was not guilty of any wrong, just like Aslan was, Jesus is resurrected.²⁹

Although there are many other instances where the Chronicles of Narnia series has been directly influenced by the Bible, this will be the last connection that will be drawn between the two. The connection is with the animal's ability to talk. When Aslan creates Narnia, he selects a pair of each of the animals and gives them the ability to talk.³⁰ Likewise, God gives Balaam's donkey the ability to talk to Balaam.³¹ The incidence in the Bible is a one off occasion utilised to teach Balaam a lesson, where the donkey asks what wrong it committed against Balaam to receive extra lashings. The chosen animals in Narnia are given the ability to speak and do speak throughout the entire series. Even though there is a difference between them in that the animals speak of their own free will all the time in Narnia, whereas Balaam's donkey only has the ability to speak because God allows it to be so, there is a direct cross over between the two.

In conclusion, the influence of the Bible has indeed stretched far across culture and the literature that has been written later than it. In our modern Australian culture, some of the names we choose to give our children are from the Bible. Some of the crimes that were forbidden in the Bible, are still forbidden now. While blasphemy is not frowned upon in our society as severely now as it was fifty years ago, there are still people deeply offended by it. The superhero culture has seen certain super human abilities and qualities attributed to its characters. These super human abilities and qualities were originally found in the Bible. Similarly, the Bible's influence over our modern literature is undoubtedly greater than what has been shown here, in this essay. But its influence does include the Harry Potter series and the Chronicles of Narnia series. They both have protagonists and antagonists locked in

²⁵ (Lewis:2010,151)

²⁶ (Lewis:2010,175)

²⁷ (Lewis:2010,185)

²⁸ (Matthew:27,45-56), (Mark:15:33-41), (Luke:23,26-49), (John:19:17-37)

²⁹ (John:20,1-9), (Luke:24,1-12), (Mark:16,1-20), (Matthew:28,1-10)

³⁰ (Lewis:2010,70)

³¹ (Numbers:22,21-39)

numerous confrontations with each other. They have their protagonists killed and then raised to life again. The Harry Potter series has quotations derived directly from the Bible. The Chronicles of Narnia series has talking animals and a lion that sings their world into existence. All in all, there is a clear influence of the Bible over the later literature and culture of our modern Australian society.